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THE POWER OF CONSCIENCE.

By a French Naval Officer.

AFTER the disastrous battle of Aboukir, in which I had witnessed the heroic death of my captain, Dupetit Thouars, I returned to France with other wounded officers, whom the English released on their parole. On our landing at Marseilles, a lucky accident caused me to meet with Mercourt, the dearest of the friends of my youth, who had been necessitated by a pulmonary complaint to try the effect of the mild air of Provence. After the first salutation, which was certainly more cordial on my part than on his, we resolved to travel together to Amiens our native city.

Mercourt had devoted himself to the law, and was at this time judge of the criminal court of Amiens. His irritable temper, the consequence of ill health and the habit of sitting in judgment on offenders, had communicated such a sternness and asperity to his manner and speech, as were far from prepossessing; and though he was naturally kind and humane, yet it was easy to perceive that he had no great regard for his fellow-creatures in general.

I burned with impatience to be once more in the bosom of my family. Our preparations for the journey were soon made; we quitted the same evening the ancient city of the Phœnicians, and pursued in the diligence to Paris. Near the door of the inn where we stopped the next morning to breakfast, I observed a handsome youth of 13 or 14, sitting on a stone bench: he was tolerably well dressed; but the dust which covered his clothes, his heated face, his weary look, and the little bundle lying beside him, plainly indicated that he must have walked a great way. "Where do you come from, my little friend?" said I to him. "From Orange, sir." "And have you travelled all that distance on foot?" "Not all the way, sir. I got a lift now and then." "Poor fellow! What obliges you who are yet so young, in this manner?" "Ah! sir, an uncle who undertook to provide for me, has all at once sent me away, and I am going back to my mother at Amiens." "At Amiens!" I repeated with astonishment.

This circumstance, and the interest with which the mild look and pleasing physiognomy of the boy had inspired me, suggested an idea which I immediately carried into execution. After I had conducted him into the kitchen, and ordered him to be supplied with breakfast. I called the coachman aside, and bargained with him for a small sum to give the boy a place in the diligence, in which myself and my friend were the only passengers.

Having finished our repast, we again got into the coach. No sooner did Mercourt espy my little protégé, than he pierced through him with that look which he imagined he discovered guilt in the deepest recesses of the soul of an accused person.—"Hallo, young one," cried he, in a deep tone, who are you?" "George Brument, sir." "Where do you come from?" "From Orange, sir." "And why the devil did you not stay there?" "My uncle has sent me away," replied he, forgetting for the first time to add the word sir. "Aha! you've been playing some scurvy trick or other, I warrant me, you young rascal! Is it not so?" "Good God! no," replied the poor fellow in a tremulous tone, as if ready to cry.—"You are going to Amiens?" continued his merciless interrogator; "but who is to take care of you there?" "My mother, who works in the gardens of General Laplace." "And so you mean to make your poor mother keep you?" "No," said the boy, with a decisive look and tone that I do not. I am small but strong, and I will work for my living." "And what, pray, will you do?" "Something—anything!" "Hem! why, yes, I dare say you will do something. You look to me for all the world like a young scoundrel, and I would lay any wager, that in my official capacity, I shall some time or other have to send you to the galleys—I can read it in your countenance." At these words, pronounced in a prophetic tone, the boy colored up to the ears. I observed how

he mechanically clenched his fists as he sat at Mercourt a look of profound contempt. For my part, this horrible prediction made almost the same impression upon me as on the poor fellow to whom it was addressed.

Nothing particular occurred during the rest of the journey. In a few days we reached Amiens. While we were engaged in looking out after our luggage, our young companion disappeared, and several years of active service elapsed before I heard of him again.

On my return after this interval, I paid a visit to one of my friends, who was a wealthy merchant. I was agreeably surprised to discover in his cashier the boy I had picked up on the road from Marseilles. M. Durand, to whom I did not communicate this circumstance, paid the highest encomiums to the zeal, the intelligence, and particularly the integrity of young Brument. I was quite delighted; and took good care not to betray my knowledge of George, lest I should hurt his feelings by reminding him of so disagreeable a rencontre.

I accompanied the unfortunate expedition to St. Domingo, where I had the mortification to see part of our naval force destroyed and after being some time a prisoner in Jamaica, returned to France. I obtained leave of absence for two or three months; but the minister refused me permission to spend it in my native place, so that I could pass but a few days at Amiens on my way to Antwerp, where I was appointed to one of the ships collecting in that harbor, and which formed the nucleus of the Scheldt flotilla.

The morning after my arrival, Mercourt, with whom I breakfasted, invited me to accompany him to the court, where an important criminal case was to be tried. "It is that," said he, "of a young man charged with forgery and falsification of papers, with a view to appropriate to himself a considerable sum of money. The affair has made a great sensation in the town."

When we reached the court, we found it thronged to excess; but at Mercourt's desire one of the officers made room for me near the place allotted to the accused. Scarcely was I seated, before the prisoner was brought in. Every eye was fixed upon him. I shall not attempt to describe the astonishment and pain which I felt on seeing George Brument take the melancholy place. With the rapidity of lightning the prediction of Mercourt darted across my mind. "Gracious God!" thought I, "is that prediction about to be verified?" I could not turn my eyes from the unfortunate young man. He seemed to be firm and composed, but was grown very thin; his eyes were sunk and hollow, and his cheeks pale. He held down his head; but when he raised it to answer the first question addressed to him, he seemed to be petrified on recognising Mercourt in the person of his judge. He trembled in every limb; the paleness of death overspread his face; and in this state he continued during the whole of the trial. At length after much pleading, he was acquitted, for want of sufficient evidence, and on the ground of his former irreproachable character.

This decision, which the accused heard without the least sign of interest, filled me with the liveliest joy. I sprang from my seat and hastened to seize George's hand, which was colder than marble. "Young man, you are acquitted: the court has pronounced you innocent!" cried I in a transport of joy. "But will the world ever believe that I am?" rejoined he. "Never doubt it: the world will strive to make you amends for your unmerited sufferings." A deep sigh was his only answer. As I had prophesied, George became from that moment an object of the notice and kindness of all the inhabitants of Amiens. M. Durand himself clasped him in his embrace, and solicited his pardon. He promised him all possible indemnification, and conjured him to go back with him to his house; but George turned a deaf ear to all his entreaties.

Soon after this event, young Brument's uncle died, and left him all his property.—He now commenced business on his own account. All his speculations were crowned

with brilliant success; and while I was traversing the seas, he was amassing considerable wealth, became the husband of an amiable woman, and father of three children, who authorized the entertainment of the fairest hopes. But though he called everything his that is capable of conferring happiness in this world, yet poor George seemed to be continually oppressed by melancholy, and as it were crushed by the overwhelming remembrance of that distressing circumstance.

On the conclusion of peace, I settled at Amiens; but in the state of mind in which Brument then was, I avoided meeting, and never visited him. One day he sent to request for me to call on him. I went, and found him on his death bed. Though still young, he fell a sacrifice to a lingering disease, the cause of which it was not difficult to guess. "I need not tell you," said he, as I approached his bed, "that I am the poor boy to whom you showed such kindness twenty one years ago. I am well aware that you know me again. I feel that I must die, and have sent for you to ease my heart of a load which oppresses it. You found me with M. Durand, who raised me from indigence, and whose bounty to me, as well as his confidence, was well-remembered. You saw me afterwards accused of a heinous crime, and tried by the rigid Mercourt. He no longer knew me, but I had not forgotten his features; and from the moment I beheld him, his tremendous prediction rolled like thunder in my ear, and seemed to be written in characters of fire, which way soever I turned my eyes.

"When I was acquitted, you strove with all your power to raise me from the despondence which you attributed to the distress occasioned by so foul an imputation on my character. But know sir, that though my judges pronounced me innocent, I was really guilty and Mercourt had prophesied truly. After my acquittal, when I received the congratulations of my friends, and my venerable mother strained me to her heart, and thanked Heaven that her son was innocent, I then fondly imagined, that if I returned to the path of virtue, I might still enjoy happy days; but divine justice reserved for me a signal punishment. My benefactors, and among them the man who had treated me as his own son, and thus cherished a viper in his bosom, came to beg my pardon, and to solicit my friendship. The remorse which I felt at that moment surpassed the horrors of the most cruel torture, and broke down my spirits for ever.

"Since that period, heaven in its inscrutable decrees has, nevertheless, heaped its blessings on my guilty head; but all that would have conferred happiness on another, only served to render me more wretched.—The caresses of my wife and children, redoubled my despair, by reminding me more strongly of my crime; and the word robber seemed to stare me in the face on every bank note and every bill of exchange that I touched. M. Durand, who has been ruined by various reverses of fortune, is living in a state very different from that opulence which he once enjoyed: I have secretly supported him till the present time. Take these papers; their value is about equal to the sum of which I defrauded him: deliver them to him, but let him not know from whom they come. Out of affection for my children, I should not wish my memory to be branded with shame."

I promised the wretched Brument to fulfil this commission. He expired in a few days and was buried with pomp suitable to his wealth. His remains were attended by numerous friends, and by many a tear of gratitude; for generous sentiments were associated in his heart with that guilty propensity which led him into a criminal act. He was gentle, compassionate, and humane; but without content and self control, the most amiable virtues are not a sufficient defence in the hour of temptation.

RIGHTS OF MEN.

Far am I from denying in theory, full as far is my heart from withholding in practice (if I were of power to give or to withhold)

the real rights of men. In denying their claims of rights, I do not mean to injure those which are real, and are such as their pretended rights would really destroy. If civil society be made for the advantage of men, all the advantages for which it is made become his right. It is an institution of beneficence; and law itself is only beneficence acting by a rule. Man have a right to live by that rule; they have a right to Justice, as between their fellows, whether their fellows are in public function or in ordinary occupation. They have a right to the fruits of industry and to the means of making their industry fruitful. They have a right to the acquisitions of their parents; to the nourishment and improvement of their offspring; to instruction in life, and to consolation in death. Whatever each man can separately do, without trespassing upon others, he has a right to do for himself; and he has a right to a fair portion of all which society, with all its combinations of skill and force, can do in his favour. In this partnership all men have equal rights: but not to equal things. He that has five shillings in the partnership, has as good a right to it, as he that has five hundred pounds has to his larger proportion. But he has not a right to an equal dividend in the product of joint stock; and as to the share of power, authority and direction, which each individual ought to have in the management of the state, that I must deny to be amongst the direct original rights of men in civil society for I have in my contemplation the civil social man and no other. It is a thing to be settled by convention.

These metaphysic rights entering into common life, like rays of light which pierce into a dense medium, are by the laws of nature, refracted from their straight line. Indeed in the gross and complicated mass of human passions and concerns, the primitive rights of man undergo such a variety of refractions and reflections, that it becomes absurd to talk of them as if they continued in the simplicity of their original direction.

The nature of man is intricate; the objects of society are of the greatest possible complexity; and therefore no simple disposition or direction of power can be suitable either to men's nature or to the quality of his affairs. When I hear the simplicity of contrivance aimed at and boasted of in any new political constitutions I am at no loss to decide that the artificers are grossly ignorant of their trade, or totally negligent of their duty; the simple governments are fundamentally defective, to say no worse of them. If you contemplate society in but one point of view, all those simple modes of polity are infinitely captivating. In effect each would answer its single end much more perfectly than the more complex is able to attain all its complex purposes. But it is better that the whole should be imperfectly and anomalously answered, than that while some parts are provided for with great exactness, others might be totally neglected, or perhaps materially injured, by the over care of a favorite member.

The pretended rights of these theorists are all extremes; and in proportion as they are metaphysically true, they are morally and politically false. The rights of men are in a sort of middle, incapable of definition, but not impossible to be discerned. The rights of men in governments are their advantages; and these are often in balances between differences of good in compromises sometimes between good and evil, and some times between evil and evil. Political reason is a computing principle; adding, subtracting, multiplying, and dividing, morally and not metaphysically or mathematically, true moral denominations.

By these theorists the rights of the people is almost sophistically confounded with their power.—The body of the community whenever it can come to act, can meet with no effectual resistance; but till power and right are the same, the whole body of them has no right inconsistent of virtue, and the first of all virtues, prudence. Men have no right to what is not reasonable, and to what is not for their benefit; for though a plea-